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# The Activities of the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities in Central Asia (1994-2001)

## *Background: Ethnic Issues in the Period Prior to the Involvement of the HCNM*

Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan emerged as independent states in Central Asia after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. The following year they also became participating States of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). The collapse of the Soviet Union left them with a host of challenges, some of which concerned relations between ethnicities. They are diverse societies with a significant share of ethnic minorities, which, to a great extent, is the result of Russian colonial and Soviet nationalities policies.

During the 1920s, Soviet nationalities policy underpinned the creation of administrative borders between the Central Asian republics. At the core of this policy was the designation of republics for the largest, so-called "titular", ethnic groups. At the same time, these republics were crafted to encompass large minorities from neighbouring states. This was partly a precautionary measure put in place by Moscow to counter the risk of separatism (effectively using the old Roman principle of *divide et impera*), partly it satisfied the demands of a highly centralized economy, and, in some cases, it was a product of trade-offs with local elites.[1] Consequently, many ethnic groups in the region are "kin minorities" whose "kin state" usually borders the state where they reside.[2]

The diversity of the region was also due to Tsarist colonization policies, which had triggered mass migration from the European part of the Russian Empire. This trend continued under Soviet rule into the 1960s.[3] The deport-

Note: The views expressed in this article are the author's own and are not necessarily shared by the HCNM or the OSCE.

1 Cf. *Central Asia: Border Disputes and Conflict Potential*. ICG Asia Report No 33, 4 April 2002, p. i, available at: http://www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/Files/asia/central-asia/Central%20Asia%20Border%20Disputes%20and%20Conflict%20Potential.pdf.

2 The Uzbeks, the most numerous ethnic group in Central Asia, illustrate this point. Uzbekistan has borders with all the other four countries of Central Asia, each of which has a significant Uzbek population, predominantly in the areas bordering Uzbekistan. There are 493,721 Uzbeks in Kazakhstan (official estimate, 2012), 796,300 in Kyrgyzstan (official estimate, 2012); no recent official data for Tajikistan and Turkmenistan is available, but CIA data for 2012 projects that Uzbeks make up 15.3 per cent and five per cent, respectively, in each country. See: https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/tx.html, https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ti.html.

3 For an overview, see Sebastien Peyrouse, *The Russian Minority in Central Asia: Migration, Politics, and Language*. Kennan Institute Occasional Paper 297, 2008, available at:

ation of entire ethnic groups as practised under Stalin in the late 1930s and 1940s added another element to a complex ethnic mosaic of the region.[4] As long as opposition to Soviet nationalities policy remained virtually unimaginable in totalitarian Soviet society, issues of ethnicity were rarely a source of open conflict.

The slackening of Moscow's grip at the end of the 1970s and in the 1980s led local elites to indulge, with almost total impunity, in corrupt activities on a scale unknown in the Soviet Union. Failures of economic and social policy created an illegal economy, triggered environmental degradation, and generated growing social divisions and competition for scarce economic resources between various ethnic groups, especially in the Ferghana Valley.

The inability of the Soviet apparatus to deal with rapidly growing unemployment and other social problems within the population was compounded by rapidly rising birth rates among all major ethnic groups except the Slavic population. All these factors strained the fabric of inter-ethnic relations and contributed to growing, but as yet unexpressed, ethnic tensions.

Everything changed when Soviet rule gradually began to crumble. Serious signs of resentment against Soviet nationalities policy emerged during the *Jeltoqsan* ("December") events in Almaty in 1986. A decision by the Politburo to dismiss the long-serving First Secretary of the Communist Party of Kazakhstan, an ethnic Kazakh, and replace him with an ethnic Russian from outside Kazakhstan triggered large-scale protests by Kazakh youth. Demonstrations were violently suppressed by the Soviet Army. In 1989, inter-ethnic riots took place in the city of Novyi Uzen (known as Zhanaozen since 1992), in western Kazakhstan, where Kazakh youth clashed with youth from the Caucasus.

In 1989 and 1990, the region witnessed two bloody conflicts in the Ferghana Valley, which is shared by Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan. One took place in June 1989 in the Uzbek SSR, where ethnic Uzbeks engaged in a series of pogroms against Meskhetians residing in Ferghana Oblast, leading to their subsequent organized resettlement to other parts of the Soviet Union. The second conflict took place in June 1990, when the cities of Uzgen and Osh (Kyrgyz SSR) sank into deadly inter-communal violence, involving the Kyrgyz and the Uzbek population of the Osh region.[5]

As in the case of the *Jeltoqsan* events, all the conflicts that raged across Soviet Central Asia in the late 1980s and early 1990s were suppressed, often

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http://mercury.ethz.ch/serviceengine/Files/ISN/55099/ipublicationdocument_singledocument/d0ca2186-e30b-4399-a282-da59b1018ed3/en/OP297.pdf.

4 For an overview, see Nikolai Bougai, *The Deportation of Peoples in the Soviet Union*, New York 1996.

5 Lesser-known ethnic pogroms also took place in other Soviet republics of Central Asia: In May 1989 in Ashgabat in the Turkmen SSR (mostly against Armenians) and in February 1990 in Dushanbe in the Tajik SSR (mostly targeting Armenians, but also other non-Tajik residents of Dushanbe).

violently, by the Soviet army and special units from across the Soviet Union. Apart from the indiscriminate use of force, the Soviet Union in its death throes could offer nothing else to the ethnic communities of Central Asia: The structural roots of the conflicts remained unaddressed. Minorities had started to feel unsecure and unwelcome in the region, and "titular" ethnic groups were being pushed towards the adoption of a more nationalistic rhetoric, although calls for full independence were still rare, and the dissolution of the USSR took Central Asia largely by surprise.

The disintegration of the USSR in 1991 led to even further drastic deterioration of the economic situation, resulting in almost total disruption of the economy. The new governments looked feeble. Unsure about their future in the new states of Central Asia, and fearful of ethnic conflicts, minorities started to leave Central Asia for their historic motherlands (Russians, Germans, Chechens) or to move to their kin-states in Central Asia (mostly ethnic Kazakhs).[6] Indeed, the conflicts that had taken place before the break-up of the Soviet Union were a sinister reminder that the building of new states in the region might not be an easy task. Some analysts had even predicted the immediate and bloody disintegration of the countries of Central Asia.[7] Many deep-seated controversies, mutual suspicions, and grievances had the potential to rapidly throw the region into the pandemonium of all-out ethnic conflict. The civil war that broke out in Tajikistan in 1992 and continued until 1997 seemed to confirm these fears, although this conflict was not based on ethnicity as such. Furthermore, the Soviet administrative borders between the newly independent states were not automatically recognized. The process of border delimitation and demarcation was seen as an almost insurmountable task.[8]

### *Involvement of the High Commissioner on National Minorities*

The post of OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities (HCNM) was established in 1992 with a mandate to identify and seek early resolution of ethnic tensions that might endanger peace, stability, or friendly relations between OSCE participating States. Max van der Stoel, former minister of for-

6 However, for a number of complex reasons, these out-migration flows did not include indigenous, "rooted minorities" of Central Asia, such as Uzbeks and Uighurs.

7 See, for example, a brief review of such forecasts in: Rafis Abazov, *Practice of Foreign Policy Making: Formation of Post-Soviet Politics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan*, 1998, p. 23, available at: http://www.nato.int/acad/fellow/96-98/abasov.pdf.

8 The process has still not been finalized. The only country in the region to complete the land border delimitation process is the Republic of Kazakhstan. Cf. Alima M. Auanasova/ Arman M. Suleimenov, Iz istorii delimitatsii gosudarstvennykh granits Respubliki Kazakhstan [From the History of the Delimitation of the State Borders of the Republic of Kazakhstan], in: *Ev*razijskij *yuridicheskij zhurnal* [Eurasian Law Journal] 4/2010, available at: http://www.eurasialaw.ru/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=652%3A2010-06-03-09-21-06&catid=99%3A2010-06-02-08-56-30&Itemid=124.

eign affairs of the Netherlands and a well-known champion of democracy and human rights, was appointed by the participating States to be the first High Commissioner on National Minorities.

The HCNM started to work in the region soon after the institution was established and long before OSCE missions were established in all five countries of the region.[9] The HCNM was thus at the forefront of OSCE engagement in the region. As early as 1994, the HCNM identified Central Asia as one of the geographic areas where he reckoned preventive diplomacy and timely policy advice could play a significant role in calming tensions and avoiding ethnic conflicts in the future. As mentioned earlier, the countries of Central Asia became participating States in 1991, which opened the way for a series of initial missions to the region by the HCNM in the mid-1990s, which were followed up by regular visits and other activities.

The following issues were recurrent topics in the HCNM's discussion with authorities in the region during that period: the establishment of dialogue between minorities and majorities; language policies; minority rights, particularly representation; citizenship issues; and the specific situation of particular minority groups. The HCNM was preoccupied with two broad priorities: first, monitoring, early warning, and prevention of ethnic conflicts that might have resulted from the collapse of the Soviet Union;[10] and second, offering advice to inform new policies being formulated in this context that could impact on minorities.

*Building Mechanisms for Dialogue and Consultation on Minority Issues*

One of the first challenges that the HCNM identified during his initial visits to the newly independent countries of Central Asia was that all of them lacked structural mechanisms and experience for open and constructive dialogue between minorities and majorities. In the opinion of Max van der Stoel, "disputes involving minorities frequently arise because of insufficient mechanisms for dialogue at the national level" and "the important thing is

9 The OSCE established its first field presence in the region in 1994, when the OSCE Long-Term Mission to Tajikistan was opened. In 1995, the OSCE opened the Central Asian Liaison Office (CALO) in Tashkent (Uzbekistan). OSCE Centres were created in Astana (Kazakhstan), Ashgabat (Turkmenistan), and Bishkek (Kyrgyzstan) in 1998. Cf. Victor-Yves Ghebali, OSCE Regional Policy in Central Asia: Rationale and Limits, in: Farian Sabahi/Daniel Warner, *The OSCE and the Multiple Challenges of Transition. The Caucasus and Central Asia*, Aldershot 2004, pp. 4-5.

10 As well as citizenship and efforts to deal with the specific situation of particular minorities, this heading also covered the delimitation and demarcation of borders. The HCNM also closely followed the rise of Islamic fundamentalism and radical religious extremism in the region in the second half of the 1990s, especially in the Ferghana Valley. Max van der Stoel was of the opinion that the ideological void that had emerged after the collapse of the USSR might quickly be supplanted not only by excessive nationalism, but also by Islamic fundamentalism and radical religious extremism, further increasing tensions in the region. For an overview of the situation in Central Asia, see: Walter A. Kemp (ed.), *Quiet Diplomacy in Action – The OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities*, The Hague 2001, pp. 273-285.

that the representatives of minorities get the possibility to present their views to the authorities, which can help the authorities to understand minorities' concerns and take these into account when developing policies".[11]

Identification of this important area led the HCNM to focus on facilitating the creation of such mechanisms or improving the function of existing structures in the sphere of promoting inter-ethnic dialogue. This aspect of his involvement can be illustrated by the active role the HCNM played in promoting the idea of consultative bodies on minority issues in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan.

For example, during his early visits to Kyrgyzstan in 1995, the HCNM developed an interest in the work of the Assembly of the People of Kyrgyzstan, a non-governmental association of 26 national cultural centres that was created at the First Kurultai of the People of Kyrgyzstan[12] in January 1994.

In August 1995, the HCNM presented a number of his recommendations with a view to restructuring the Assembly and entrusting it with broad advisory competencies, including in the legislative sphere, as he felt that the Assembly "has not yet reached its full potential".[13] The HCNM also advised that implementing these reforms would require the creation of a suitable normative and institutional framework for the Assembly. On the whole. the government was positive about the HCNM's recommendations and drafted a number of proposals changing the Assembly's structure.[14]

The HCNM's main recommendation was to create within the Assembly a compact Executive Council composed of representatives of the various national cultural centres and representatives of ministries whose competences affected the interests of the various minorities in Kyrgyzstan. The Council was to meet at least once a month; it should also have incorporated commissions to deal with specific subjects. The HCNM further recommended that one of the departments of the office of the President should be assigned to

11 Max van der Stoel, *Preventing Ethnic Conflict and Building Cohesive States. Memorable Words of Max van der Stoel, First OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities from His Speeches 1992-2001*. Compiled and edited by Marianna Merrick Yamamoto, Carmichael, Ca., 2007, p. 8. See also Victor-Yves Ghebali, The High Commissioner on National Minorities after 15 Years: Achievements, Challenges and Promises, in: *Security and Human Rights* 2/2009, pp. 111-122. Ghebali argues that a "first step towards the diffusion of ethnic tensions should normally be the establishment of an institutionalized structure of communication between the parties […] conducive to a regular dialogue and confidence-building". Ibid., p. 115.

12 The Kurultai is a body specially convened by presidential decree and purported to represent the people of Kyrgyzstan. The Kurultai used to be a historic form of representation among the Kyrgyz.

13 Letter of Max van der Stoel, OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities, to H.E. Roza Otunbaeva, Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kyrgyzstan, of 7 August 1995, Ref. No. 897/95/L, HCNM Archive.

14 Cf. Letter of Kubanychbek Zhumaliev, First Deputy State Secretary of the Kyrgyz Republic, to Max van der Stoel, OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities, of 3 October 1995, Ref. No. 16-640, HCNM Archive. See also: Foundation on Inter-Ethnic Relations, *The Role of the High Commissioner on National Minorities in OSCE Conflict Prevention. An Introduction*, The Hague, June 1997, p. 65.

concentrate exclusively on questions related to minorities and support the work of the Executive Council.[15]

In a letter of 10 March 1996, the authorities of the Republic of Kyrgyzstan informed the HCNM that his recommendations had been taken into consideration during the reorganization of the Assembly that had been put before and approved by the Second Kurultai of the People of Kyrgyzstan.[16] In 1997, the Council of the Assembly was given a consultative and advisory function under the President of the Kyrgyz Republic.[17]

The Assembly of the Peoples (now known as the Assembly of the People) of Kazakhstan was set up in Kazakhstan in March 1995. The idea of such a body had been put forward by President Nursultan Nazarbayev as early as 1992 in his speech at the First Forum of the Peoples of Kazakhstan.[18] The HCNM, during his second visit to the country in 1995, paid close attention to the workings of the newly established Assembly, which had also acquired a consultative and advisory status under the President. The HCNM's concern was how to transform it into an effective mechanism for regular consultations between authorities and minority representatives.[19]

During visits to other countries in the region, the HCNM also proposed the setting up of similar consultative bodies. In Uzbekistan, the HCNM familiarized himself with the work of the Republican Inter-Ethnic Cultural Centre. In Tajikistan, he kept a close eye on the Public Council, which met regularly under the aegis of the Tajik President and included representatives of minorities.

Overall, the assemblies and similar bodies in Central Asia played an important role in the 1990s as established venues for communication between authorities and minorities. They contributed to the creation of an environment of confidence building on minority issues as well as to the overcoming of existing tensions by giving minorities access to decision makers at the very highest level. The interest of the authorities was also genuine, since in times of complex transformation they wanted to keep channels of communication open with minorities. The discussions at events organized by the assemblies and similar bodies were vibrant and open. They touched upon the protection of minority rights, language policy, the representation of minorities in public bodies, development of national human rights institutions, religious extremism, and broader issues of democratization and rule of law. In the period

15 Cf. Letter of Max van der Stoel to Roza Otunbaeva, cited above (Note 13).
16 Cf. Letter of Emilbek Kaptagaev, Adviser to the Prime Minister of the Kyrgyz Republic, to Max van der Stoel, OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities, HCNM Archive.
17 See *Ukaz Prezidenta Kyrgyzskoi Respubliki "O statuse soveta Assamblei naroda Kyrgyzstana" ot 14 yanvarya 1997, No 13* [Decree of the President of the Kyrgyz Republic "On the status of the Council of the Assembly of the People of Kyrgyzstan" of 14 January 1997, No 13], HCNM Archive.
18 Cf. *Assambleya naroda Kazakhstana* [The Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan], at: http://akorda.kz/ru/page/page_assambleya-naroda-kazakhstana_1352453861.
19 Cf. Foundation on Inter-Ethnic Relations, cited above (Note 14), p. 63.

under review, the HCNM worked actively with such dialogue mechanisms to demonstrate how they could be enhanced and used in practice to mitigate tensions and prevent conflict. He also made recommendations on how they could be anchored in a more comprehensive normative and institutional framework that would allow them to develop into genuine mechanisms for consultations between governments and minorities.

*Balanced Language Policy*

From 1989 to 1992, all the countries of Central Asia made the languages of their "titular" ethnic groups their new state languages, downgrading Russian to the role of a language of inter-ethnic communication. During his early visits to Central Asia, the HCNM recommended that the governments of the region should take a flexible and gradual approach to the introduction of state languages. In some countries in the region, the HCNM supported the idea that Russian should continue to be used in the public sphere, particularly to allow representatives of minorities to use it in communication with state bodies providing various services, including in the court system.[20] He contended that such an approach, coupled with gradual introduction of the state language, would ease tensions between majorities and minorities[21] while stabilizing the region's massive out-migration flows.[22] On the whole, the new governments in these countries reacted positively to this recommendation. The HCNM also paid attention to the use of other minority languages in Central Asia, especially in view of "The Oslo Recommendations regarding the Linguistic Rights of National Minorities" that were developed under his auspices during his tenure as HCNM (1 February 1998). In sum, for various reasons, the majority of Central Asian countries, the exception being Turkmenistan, adopted new language policies that were – at least in theory – more nuanced than those of other post-Soviet countries and which remained in place until the end of the last decade.[23]

20 Although the status of the Russian language was indeed changed in Kazakhstan (1995) and Kyrgyzstan (2001) from a language of inter-ethnic communication to a language that can be also used in official communications on a par with the state language, it would be simplistic to imagine that the HCNM was solely responsible for this change. It was rather a complex combination of political and other factors that led to the change of the status of the Russian language in both republics at the start of the last decade.

21 Cf. Letter of Max van der Stoel, OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities, to H.E. Kanat B. Saudabayev, Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan, of 29 April 1994, Ref. No. 2357/94/L, HCNM Archive.

22 Max van der Stoel was also of the opinion that creating links between ethnic groups in the field of education could counteract emigration from the region following the break-up of the Soviet Union. This was the rationale behind the HCNM's visit to the Kyrgyz-Russian (Slavic) University in Bishkek, which was opened in 1993 under the patronage of the governments of Kyrgyzstan and Russia. Cf. Foundation on Inter-Ethnic Relations, cited above (Note 14), p. 65.

23 For an overview, see Birgit N. Schlyter, Language Policies in Present-Day Central Asia, in: *International Journal on Multicultural Societies,* 2/2001, pp. 127-136.

*Minority Rights, Particularly the Representation of Minorities in Public Administration*

Throughout the second half of the 1990s and into the 2000s, the HCNM organized a wide range of seminars and conferences in Central Asia on various aspects of minority rights and social integration. The discussions were also aimed at highlighting three thematic recommendations – relating to education, linguistic rights, and the effective participation of minorities in public life – that were developed by the HCNM in the second half of the 1990s.[24] The HCNM also paid significant attention to the representation of minorities in public administration and the development of national human rights mechanisms in the region, including capacity building efforts, with the aim of addressing issues of ethnic discrimination. For instance, in one of his letters from that period, the HCNM wrote:

> The question of job distribution amongst ethnic groups in public administration is usually a highly sensitive one in a multi-ethnic society. In order to end such complaints one could, at least in theory, think of a system of quota in strict proportion to the percentage of the total population of each ethnic group. However, the creation of such a system would imply that ethnicity might prevail over ability, which should in my view remain, at any rate in principle, the primary criterion in the process of selection of candidates. On the other hand, it is clearly undesirable that in state administration, or in the regional or local level of the administration, one ethnic group would be represented much more strongly, or much less so, than the percentage of the population would suggest. [25]

In this particular case, the HCNM suggested studying this issue with representatives of various minorities and taking appropriate action, if serious imbalances were found to occur. He also urged that a special board to deal with complaints in this field should be established, in addition to existing human rights institutions. The task of such a board, comprising members of different ethnic groups, would be to deal with job discrimination and discrimination concerning access to higher education.

24 The Hague Recommendations Regarding the Education Rights of National Minorities, 1 October 1996; The Oslo Recommendations regarding the Linguistic Rights of National Minorities, 1 February 1998; The Lund Recommendations on the Effective Participation of National Minorities in Public Life, 1 September 1999. Available at: http://www.osce.org/hcnm/66209.

25 Letter of Max van der Stoel to Kanat Saudabayev, cited above (Note 21).

*Citizenship Issues*

One of the recurring issues that the HCNM had to deal with during his early visits to Central Asia was citizenship. This complex problem was directly related to the collapse of the Soviet Union and was particularly acute in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. For example, during his first visit to Kazakhstan, which took place on 18-21 April 1994, almost all those he spoke raised this issue as a matter of concern. Nineteen ninety-four saw the highest number of people emigrating from Kazakhstan of all the years between independence in 1991 and the present day.[26] Although the Kazakhstani government made it clear that it would regret their departure, a considerable number of persons belonging to minorities left the country. This wave of migration was driven by a combination of economic and psychological factors: People were looking for better economic prospects and were unsure about their place in the new state. Some who had been contemplating such a move but had remained in the country were concerned that change of citizenship would not be available to them in the future. The scale of migration, which had a considerable negative effect on the economy, also alarmed the authorities.

Following his first visit to Kazakhstan in 1994, the HCNM presented his recommendations to the authorities on this issue. He expressed the hope that an arrangement would be worked out with the Russian Federation, which is the major destination for emigrants, whereby a simplified procedure for the acquisition of citizenship in another state might be introduced for persons wishing to move from one state to another.[27] In January 1995, such an agreement between Kazakhstan and Russia was signed. It provided a simplified procedure for granting Russian citizenship to citizens of Kazakhstan while also enabling visa-free travel between the two countries for their citizens. This had a twofold effect: First, it made it easier for ethnic Russians and members of other ethnic groups to obtain Russian citizenship; second, it had a stabilizing influence by providing a mechanism that could be used at any time in the future by Kazakhstani citizens contemplating a move to Russia.[28]

The HCNM paid his first visit to Kyrgyzstan on 22-24 April 1994. As in the case of Kazakhstan, he then presented his recommendations, which also focused on the issue of citizenship. He expressed the hope that Kyrgyzstan would follow Kazakhstan in negotiating the simplified citizenship-acquisition procedure for Kyrgyzstani citizens who wish to move to Russia. This would

26 Cf. Elena Sadovskaya. Kazakhstan v Tsentral'noaziatskoi migratsionnoi subsisteme [Kazakhstan in the Central Asian Migration Subsystem], in: Zhanna A. Zaionchkovskaya/ Galina S. Vitkovskaya (eds), *Postsovetskie transformatsii: otrazhenie v migratsiyakh* [Post-Soviet Transformations: Reflection in Migration, Moscow 2009, pp. 279-321, here: p. 281.

27 Cf. Letter of Max van der Stoel to Kanat Saudabayev, cited above (Note 21).

28 Cf. Foundation on Inter-Ethnic Relations, cited above (Note 14), p. 62.

encourage Russians to remain in Kyrgyzstan, as they would know that they could obtain Russian citizenship should the need arise.[29]

*The Specific Situations of Particular Minority Groups*

The first country that the HCNM travelled to in Central Asia was Kazakhstan. He visited it 1994 and 1995, engaging in a wide-ranging exchange of opinions with the Kazakh authorities and representatives of national minorities. While articulating his support for the development of Kazakh as the state language, he also called for this not to be done at the expense of other languages. The mass exodus of Russians and Germans from Kazakhstan struck him particularly. He saw this emigration process largely as an economic phenomenon and hoped that the economic upturn would create favourable conditions for these minorities to stay in Kazakhstan. At the same time, the HCNM saw some worrying signs in the field of inter-ethnic relations. In his view, if Kazakhstan is to achieve stable development, a range of policies affecting the sphere of inter-ethnic relations need to be adjusted, especially in relation to language, but also touching upon employment in the public sector.

In 1996, the HCNM visited Kazakhstan again and travelled to Ust-Kamenogorsk, Petropavlovsk, and Uralsk, where he held meetings with representatives of local authorities and minorities. The inter-ethnic situation in these regions of Kazakhstan he described as stable, noting, however, rising tensions between Kazakhs and Russians, who at that time represented the majority of population in eastern and northern Kazakhstan. A significant element of this visit involved an exchange of opinions with various Cossack organizations, which were even calling for transfer of some parts of Kazakhstan to Russia.[30] This trip helped to prepare a round table that took place on 8-9 December 1996 in Locarno, Switzerland. The event was chaired by the HCNM and hosted by the Swiss government. The event, "Kazakhstan: Building a Coherent Multicultural and Multiethnic Society on the Eve of 21st Century", brought together high-ranking officials and minority representatives. It dealt with a number of issues, but concentrated on the situation of Cossacks in Kazakhstan. The discussion helped to ease existing tensions, as the event served as a good platform for dialogue, moving the discussion forward by strengthening the collaborative approach to solving inter-ethnic issues.[31] Subsequently, relations between the Kazakh authorities and various Cossack organizations improved.[32]

29 Cf. Letter of Max van der Stoel, CSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities, to H.E. Roza Isakovna Otunbayeva, Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kyrgyzstan, of 29 April 1994, Ref. No. 2369/94/L, HCNM Archive.
30 Cf. Kemp, cited above (Note 10), p. 273.
31 Cf. Foundation on Inter-Ethnic Relations, cited above (Note 14), pp. 63-64.
32 Cf. Kemp, cited above (Note 10), p. 275.

In April 1996, the HCNM visited south Kyrgyzstan, meeting with officials in Osh and Jalal-Abad to see how relations between communities were developing following the conflict in 1990.[33] He noted that there was considerable distrust between the Kyrgyz and Uzbek communities and that channels of communication between the Kyrgyz authorities in the south and various ethnic groups, especially the Uzbeks, were totally insufficient.[34] Discussions he held with the President dealt with issues of representation, especially concerning law-enforcement and educational policy.[35] The HCNM also discussed the growth of Islamic fundamentalism in the Kyrgyz part of the Ferghana Valley with the Kyrgyz authorities.

In the late 1990s, the HCNM visited Uzbekistan and Tajikistan several times. He was very concerned with the effect of Islamic fundamentalism on inter-ethnic relations, especially in the Ferghana Valley.[36] For example, as early as 1998, Uzbek officials expressed concerns about the rise of extremism and Islamic fundamentalism, particularly in the Ferghana Valley, and about the spillover effects of developments in Tajikistan and Afghanistan. The threat became real when militant members of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) attempted several incursions from Afghanistan through Tajikistan to Kyrgyzstan, making the IMU a major source of instability in the Ferghana Valley between 1999 and 2001.[37] The HCNM discussed this issue with Uzbekistan's President Islam Karimov during a visit to Tashkent in October 1999. The HCNM expressed the opinion that more room for civil society and better protection of human rights would be the best response to religious extremism. However, the Uzbek authorities adopted a heavy-handed approach to dealing with these issues.

## *Conclusion*

The role of the HCNM in visiting these specific regions of Central Asian countries was to assess the situation on the ground and help to build trust between minorities and majorities in order to work out long-term means of preventing potential conflicts. In conclusion, it can be said that the HCNM's involvement in Central Asia from 1994-2001 was important in terms of building trust and dialogue with all stakeholders. His expertise and "quiet diplomacy" skills were sought and appreciated by new governments as well

33 Cf. Foundation on Inter-Ethnic Relations, cited above (Note 14), pp. 65.
34 Cf. Kemp, cited above (Note 10), p. 280.
35 Cf. ibid., p. 281
36 Cf. ibid., p. 283.
37 Cf. Walter Kemp, Breaking the Crime-Conflict Nexus: A Challenge for the OSCE, in: Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg/IFSH (ed.), *OSCE Yearbook 2003*, Baden-Baden 2004, pp. 301-318, here: p. 307.

as by minority groups, as the risk of slipping into conflict was quite real for many countries in the region.[38]

The HCNM had to operate in a rapidly changing political climate that was quite dangerously volatile, looking for practical ways to bridge extreme positions. This was a test for his methodology, which was built on the principles of impartiality, confidentiality, and co-operation and firmly rooted in the ultimate value of minority-rights protection as a pre-condition for any possible political solution.

The above elements of the HCNM's methodology have been identified as the linchpins of success for his role as a mechanism of preventive diplomacy. They also set limits on how far the HCNM could go in identifying and proposing solutions. More often than not, the parties concerned were not unanimously eager to accept his recommendations, but the HCNM's engagement was nonetheless valued, as it set out genuine strategies and parameters for resolving brewing tensions. The HCNM's on-the-ground approach allowed him unimpeded lines of communication with all concerned parties and meant he could actively work towards the resolution of various cases of ethnic tension.

However, the HCNM was not only involved in immediate, short-term conflict prevention in the region. In hindsight, it is clear that his work in Central Asia during this period was firmly built on the premise that short-term conflict prevention is inseparable from a long-term focus on the deep-rooted causes of tensions and on establishing new policies that are equitable and just and firmly rooted in the protection of minority rights – fundamental components for the genuine integration of society.

As the situation in the region became more stable and predictable and the danger that it would slip into a deadly cycle of ethnic conflict receded, the HCNM became increasingly concerned with the long-term cohesiveness of the Central Asian states and their ability to integrate various minorities in an inclusive and democratic way. Their failure to achieve this so far has been

38 Although it is an over-simplification, the following assessment of the HCNM's activities in Central Asia by Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of the Netherlands and Chairman-in-Office of the OSCE in 2003, nonetheless captures the scale and thrust of the work done by the HCNM in the region from 1994 to 2001: "During his time as High Commissioner, Mr Van der Stoel played a key role in preventing ethnic conflict in Central Asia, most notably in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan: when these two countries became independent, tension quickly arose over the position of the Russian minorities left within their borders. Van der Stoel entered into a discrete dialogue with the leaders in both countries and managed to convince them that it would be wise to improve the access of ethnic Russians to education and to upgrade the status of their language. With the bone of contention removed, tension subsided. Van der Stoel also helped to prevent the escalation of ethnic tensions in the Ferghana Valley." *Address by Mr Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of the Netherlands and Chairman-in-Office of the OSCE*, *"Rebuilding the Silk Road: The OSCE Experience in Central Asia"*, Chinese People's Institute of Foreign Affairs, Beijing, 25 August 2003, available at: http://www.osce.org/cio/42470.

described by the HCNM as the greatest challenge facing all Central Asian countries in the years to come.